

# DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

Publication No. 157140

ISSN 0012-2874

A magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers

Vol. 51, No. 4

August 1982

Whole No. 556

## Frank Merriwell's Hundredth Birthday

By David Soibelman



DIME NOVEL SKETCHES NO. 228

STARRY FLAG SERIES

Publisher: Street & Smith, 79-89 Seventh Ave., New York, N. Y. Issues: 6.  
Dates: Oct. 12, 1916 to Dec. 28, 1916. Schedule of Issue: Semi-monthly. Size:  
7x4 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Pages: 250-280. Price: 10c. Illustrations: Colored pictorial cover.  
Contents: Reprinting of the 6 Optic stories of the Starry Flag Series originally  
published by Lee & Shepard in 1868.

## Frank Merriwell's Hundredth Birthday

By David Soibelman

(Submitted for publication in the April 1996 issue of DNR, but editor couldn't wait.)

I mailed a letter today to my friend, Ed LeBlanc of Fall River, the head man of the national Happy Hours Brotherhood whose members collect, preserve and reminisce about the dime novels of their youth. I complained that April 18 had passed without a word written or spoken about that day as the 100th birthday of Frank Merriwell, the greatest hero in modern juvenile literature.

Newspapers and broadcasters did mark the day with accounts of the 1906 San Francisco fire-cum-earthquake but not a syllable was said about the noble character whose feats on and off the athletic fields and in the faroff places of the world made reading of the 5-cent Tip Top Weekly a must for generations of boys. I'm happy to say I was one of them.

Frank Merriwell was the most popular (popular, my eye; he was the most admired) mythic figure in American juvenile literature from the late 19th Century to the mid 20s of the 20th Century. I had hoped Mayor Tom Bradley would proclaim April 18 as Frank Merriwell Day, the City Council and the Board of Supervisors would adopt resolutions in tribute, collectors and book dealers would enjoy a Merriwell dinner at the Biltmore Hotel, the Yale Alumni Association would conduct a lodge of sorrow to note his passing, and that the book reviews of the nations would do right by him. But no. The day passed into the bleak vault of history without a proper do for him.

Frank Merriwell first appeared on the literary scene on April 18, 1896 when he was a 16-year-old plebe at Fardale Military Academy. His creator Burt L. Standish (born W. Gilbert Patten) wrote some 20,000,000 words in 986 "dime novels" which narrated the moral paragon's triumphs in athletics, adventures, loves and righteousness, and in all other activities you can imagine every week for nearly 30 years with \$150 as his top check for a story.

I have read hundreds of these stories, own a collection of 65 originals, and have followed the peerless one's career through reprints, rivals and the weighty and wordy analyses of professors of English and the cosmic comments of amused anthropologists. Therefore I understand why he was read so avidly and still is treasured by many. He was the True Hero, a credible figure, albeit fictional, to his readers, and he became synonymous with the virtues and athletic and other skills his readers wished they could emulate.

Who was Frank Merriwell and why do so many elderly men today breathe wistfully the melancholy air of nostalgia at the sound or the sight of his name? Because there never was anyone like him. Not even today.

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DIME NOVEL ROUNDUP—Vol. 51, No. 4, Whole No. 556 — August 1982  
Publications No. 157140 ISSN 0012-2874

Published six times per year at 821 Vermont Street, Lawrence, Kansas 66044. Edward T. LeBlanc, editor, 87 School Street, Fall River, Mass. 02720. Second class postage paid at Lawrence, Kansas. 66044. Assistant Editor, Ralph F. Cummings, 161 Pleasant St., South Grafton, Mass. 01560. Subscription: \$10 per year. Ad rates—15c per word, \$3.00 per column inch; \$6.00 per quarter page; \$8.00 per half page and \$15.00 per full page.

Postmaster: Send form 3579 to 821 Vermont St., Lawrence, Kans. 66044



Frank Merriwell (the two names have become a lingual combination to be spoken only together like ham'n'eggs) was, in brief, the nonpareil. He was the most famous athlete at Fardale and at Yale where year after predictable year he rushed the winning touchdown in the final minute of the game against Harvard.

He thrashed the bullies, foiled the villains, chapter by chapter, rescued the girls he loved, lead a team of his college "chums" to defeat the Boston Red Sox, Philadelphia Athletics and the Chicago Colts by pitching the "double-shoot" which curved both ways. Honest. His creator made him unbeatable at track and field, baseball, bootball, basketball (just invented), billiards, boxing, ventriloquism, wrestling, fencing, target shooting, archery, finding his way out of a jungle, equestrianism, poker (oh, but only to expose a cheat), sculling, locating a gold mine, rope twirling, bulldogging, marathon running, speaking in Indian tongues, driving a "motor car" without a lesson, mountain climbing and other manly graces, all with virtuosity and modesty.

He was quite a fellow. Now he is long gone. He would have been most uncomfortable in today's world of college recruiting of athletics, profane coaches, and fantabulous salaries merely for playing games. He played for Yale and for the honor of winning his Y.

Cantabrigians who sing of Fair Harvard on Saturday afternoons in November when gray clouds scud across the lowering skies above the crowded stadium will sneeringly tell any inquirer that there never was a Frank Merriwell who beat the Crimson Tide year after year.

What, no Frank Merriwell? Why, yes, Virgil, as long as there are boys who can take time out from today's distractions and chores to read books about heroes who inspire respect, admiration and emulation by their conduct and their achievements, there will always be a Frank Merriwell to brighten and heighten the young and the starry-eyed.

Happy Hundredth Birth, Frank Merriwell!

## WANTED

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## John Wallace (Capt. Jack) Crawford: The Dime Novel On Stage

By Mark Robson

University of Southwestern Louisiana

John Wallace (Capt. Jack) Crawford, "The Poet Scout," stated frequently in both his private life and in his autobiographical full-length plays that he was vehemently opposed to such evils as alcohol, immoral men, and, most importantly, "bad books" or dime novels. Crawford believed unequivocally that reading dime novels led many young boys on to greater evils: in "A Chapter for Boys" from his 1886 edition of poetry, "The Poet Scout" (New York: Funk and Wagnals), for example, Crawford states that "Many of the young men in the penitentiaries of the Western States and Territories assert unqualifiedly that they were brought to their present shame and disgrace through reading dime novels." Such sentiments are also expressed in his three full-length plays, "Fonda" (1877), "The Mighty Truth" (1889), and "Colonel Bob" (1908). Paul T. Nolan in an article in "Dime Novel Round-Up" (November, 1963) has shown that through his plays and in his private life, Crawford was "the relentless foe of the dime novels."

It is ironic, then, that someone who was so opposed to the dime novel should have used many conventions from it in his own writing, as Crawford's three full-length plays all rely to some degree on the characterizations, language, and action popularized in the dime novel. In fact, Nolan stated in the "Round-Up" that "Crawford was a natural dime-novel author," and comments that "he knew the methods of plotting, character, and dialogue that might have given him a place with (Ned) Buntline and (Prentiss) Ingraham had he turned his talents to such authorship." Buntline was a close friend of Crawford's, and had even written about him in "Captain Jack, or, The Seven Scouts" (#396 of Log Cabin Library, Street and Smith). Ingraham, also, used Crawford as a character in many of his Buffalo Bill novels, and he was actually the hero of two Ingraham novels, "The Adventurous Life of Captain Jack" (Beadle's Boy's Library, #63) and "Captain Jack in Rocky Roost" (Beadle's Boy's Library, vol. 5, #58), which Nolan, in his introduction to Crawford's plays (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), believes was written after Crawford "supplied some of the details of his life story to Ingraham, which Ingraham then used with free license."

In the "Preface" to his "Poet Scout," Crawford denied any connection with the dime novel: "I have never figured as a hero of fiction or dime novels, and have refused to allow my name to be used in connection with that kind of literature." However, it is evident that Crawford's name was used many times in the dime novels, although perhaps, as he argues in "A Chapter for Boys," without his consent. In the "Biographical Sketch" by Leigh Irvine in "The Poet Scout," though, there is a letter reproduced from Crawford to Buntline, in which Crawford apparently did not mind being depicted as a hero in dime novels, as long as Buntline got the facts of his life correct, specially about his abstinence from drinking.

After being taught to read and write while recovering from wounds received in the Civil War, Crawford read many dime novels and thereby gained a romanticized notion of the West which he later wished other young men to avoid. After the Civil War, Crawford went West and became a hunter and scout. It was while chief of the U. S. Scouts in the Dakotas that Crawford joined Buffalo Bill's traveling troupe and took a starring role in Cody's "Life on the



Border." In 1877, a year after he joined the troupe, Crawford was injured by an intoxicated Cody in one production, after which the two men parted company. Crawford then became a government scout in the New Mexico-Arizona Territory. Over the next thirty years, Crawford wrote poetry and drama, and traveled the country performing his plays, reading his poetry, singing his songs, and lecturing against such evil institutions as the dime novel and alcohol.

The first two of Crawford's full-length plays and the one-man, one-act prohibition drama, "The Dregs" (1907), are in the tradition of the dime novels, and in some respects, "Colonel Bob" can also be seen in the dime novel tradition. Indeed, it almost appears as if Crawford was deliberately attempting to put the dime novel on stage. Such inconsistencies between Crawford's beliefs and his writings can be explained by his limited literary background, the dime novels of which must have been a great influence, and also by the limited resources available in the Southwest. Crawford was also undoubtedly influenced by the melodramatic "plays" of Cody. The three full-length plays by Crawford are all melodramatic, and the main male character in each case is based on Crawford's own life and ideals, and the character was always played by Crawford himself. Indeed, the Crawford-character overwhelms the play with his presence—a typical melodramatic technique where the play only exists for the main character. Crawford may not have picked up this technique only from the drama of his age or even from the Cody "plays" with which he was familiar, but from the dime novels which tend to concentrate on one character. In his biography of Crawford (Boston: Twayne, 1981), Nolan argues that the subject-matter of the dime novels would not have offended Crawford, because it usually presented an optimistic view of America through a "reporting" on news events and a taking up of popular crusades, such as that against alcohol. Nolan also states that Crawford "used the techniques of the dime novel in his own writing and accepted the values preached in them."

The characters in Crawford's plays appear to be straight out of the dime-novel tradition. All of the characters are immediately and easily identifiable as either good or evil. There is never any doubt that the good characters will remain good throughout the play, and that the bad characters will not reform. The only real changes in character that take place are in "The Mighty Truth," when Bill Wilde vows to give up alcohol after hearing Jack Wallace's moving story of his mother's last request that "you will never let a drop of liquor pass your lips"; and in "Colonel Bob," when Forrester, who, with Hathaway, tricked Robert Danforth and Jim Fullerton into a fake mining adventure in Alaska, confesses to the stockholders of the company that he and Hathaway were liars and cheats. However, Forrester, from the start of the play, had made it clear to the audience that he was not interested in tricking anyone, but that Hathaway blackmailed him into doing it.

The Crawford-character in each play (Jack Crawford in "Fonda," Jack Wallace in "The Mighty Truth," and Robert Danforth in "Colonel Bob") is consistent with the heroes of many of the dime novels, particularly those dealing with Buffalo Bill. He is gallant, handsome, strong, witty (in the eighteenth-century definition), respects all women, but most importantly he is a God-loving and God-fearing man who believes in doing things the right and honorable way. In each play, there is the inherently good Crawford-character and his partner pitted against the inherently evil characters. In "Fonda," Crawford and Bill Williams, two frontiersmen, save Fonda and other settlers from the evil clutches of the Mormon Elder Force, "A secret agent of Brigham

Young," and the Indians who side with the Mormons in Utah; in "The Mighty Truth," Wallace and Bill Wilde, two government scouts, save Edna Howard from the Indians, and expose Lame Dog, a Sioux Indian chief, and Frank Watson, a clerk at the Indian Agency, as villains; and in "Colonel Bob," Danforth and Fullerton, "typical" Western men, finally expose the crooked dealings of Hathaway and Forrester and their supposedly prosperous claims in Alaska. As is the case in the dime novels, Crawford's plays have clearly defined good and evil characters who constantly struggle against each other.

It is the action in Crawford's plays, though, which most easily identifies them with the dime novels. Although "Fonda" and "Colonel Bob" are five-act plays and "The Mighty Truth" a three-act play, there are numerous "scenes" within many of the acts which are reminiscent of the many characteristic short chapters in the dime novels. Quite often, each set of people in the various plots and sub-plots will meet independently in the same act, thereby moving the play along quickly. In the dime novels, the chapters tend to be short, and consequently the action moves quickly in them. In the first two of Crawford's full-length plays, there are constant confrontations between the forces of good and the forces of evil, which is similar to the basic plot structure of many of the dime novels; in "Colonel Bob," the only real confrontation occurs at the end of Act IV when Danforth and Fullerton return from Alaska with the news that the whole prospecting scheme of Hathaway and Forrester's is a fraud.

The melodramatic nature of Crawford's plays resembles the action of the dime novels, in that the actions, characters, and sentiments are often highly exaggerated in an attempt at dramatic situations. The actions of all of the good and evil characters in "Fonda" and "The Mighty Truth" are stylized and stereotyped—they all act according to a pre-determined set of rules, in much the same way that the stock characters in the dime novels were supposed to act.

Part of the melodramatic technique, however, concerns the numerous coincidences which Crawford chose to incorporate in his works. In "Fonda," Fonda turns out to be the long-lost niece of Bill Williams, and other coincidences of place help artificially to speed the plot and place the heroes in a good light. In "The Mighty Truth," Watson turns out to be Edna Howard's father's murderer, Bill Wilde discovers that Tat Benson, a mountain girl and friend of Jack Wallace, is the girl he had raised many years earlier after her parents died. Again, the coincidence of place plays a large part in the play, as Jack Wallace and some other characters happen to be in the right place for some heroic actions to speed the plot and action. In "Colonel Bob," Mildred Hathaway, the wife of the con man Hathaway, was Danforth's divorced wife who had not kept in touch with him, and there is much sentimentality in the reunion of Danforth and his child, Davy.

The language in the full-length plays often seems contrived and typical, and is similar to the language patterns and styles in many dime novels, indicating that there are certain stock conventions which Crawford used in his dialogue and which he may have borrowed from the other form. The heroes often have set speeches, especially when they are aggressive and are confronting the enemy, and the bad Indians all talk in broken English while the good Indians talk in good English.

In addition to the full-length plays of Crawford which appear to be in the dime novel tradition, his one-act play, "The Dregs," which concerns a young student's downfall and subsequent tragedies due to his excessive drinking, resembles many of the temperance dime novels. Two novels by Jno B. Dowd are examples of this type of dime novels: "The First Glass, or The Woes of



Wine" ("Pluck and Luck Complete Stories of Adventure," New York, November 22, 1899) and "Joe Wiley: The Young Temperance" ("Pluck and Luck," March 10, 1915). The only character in "The Dregs" is Frank, a melodramatic exaggeration of a type, who speaks the language of the dime novels, and whose outcome—death, or a projected death if he continues to drink—is similar to the moral statements made in the temperance dime novels.

Crawford himself led something of a dime-novel life, as is exemplified by the fact that such men as Buntline and Ingraham used him as a character in some of their own writings. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Crawford wrote his full-length plays with himself as the central protagonist, the plays took on the characteristics of the dime novel. The plots of the plays, like the plot of Crawford's life, resemble those that might be found in dime novels. Crawford was certainly familiar with the genre, and although he wrote and lectured against the "ridiculous trash" being written by the novelists, he could not quite escape from the dime novels, and appeared to put it on stage through his own plays.

### Suggested Reading

- Capt. Jack Crawford. "The Poet Scout." New York: Funk and Wagnals, 1886.  
 Paul T. Nolan, "Provincial Drama in America, 1870-1916," Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1967. Reprints "The Dregs."  
 Paul T. Nolan. "Three Plays by J. W. (Capt. Jack) Crawford." The Hague: Mouton, 1966. The only edition of Crawford's full-length plays.  
 Paul T. Nolan, "Captain Jack: The Relentless Foe of the Dime Novel." "Dime Novel Round-Up," 31, 11 (November 15, 1963), 102-104.  
 Paul T. Nolan. "John Wallace Crawford." Boston: Twayne, 1981. The only full-length biography of Crawford.

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## Christopher Morley Talks About Books

By Willis J. Potthoff

Among the many books written by Christopher Morley there are two small fictional novelettes that deserve more attention than the others. *PARNASSUS ON WHEELS* and *THE HAUNTED BOOKSHOP* are the kind of "book" literature that should be a part of every collector's library.

This observation or belief has nothing to do with their literary value, or the opinion of so-called "critics." Book collectors are something like "misers," never getting all the books they want, and valuing their books far beyond their true value. This has nothing to do with "good" or "bad" books.

Since the very first book was printed we have had many statements and writings that praise and glorify the value of books and how important they are to our society.

In the two books of Christopher Morley the author gives us an explanation and evaluation of what people read and why they read. Morley does not do this with a series of axioms or unrelated facts, but as a part of the main body of the story, as part of the dialogue that is interesting and understandable.

In each of these two books, the first about a traveling book-van called Parnassus on Wheels, and the second about a used-book store in Brooklyn called Parnassus At Home, the main plot of the story is formulated around books, but the real value of the book is what the author has to say about books.

Christopher Morley, through the main character, Roger Mifflin, provides the reader with interesting observations on books, authors, used-book stores, used-book dealers and book lovers as well. Roger Mifflin is the owner of Parnassus On Wheels and the proprietor of Parnassus At Home. In each of the two books, we receive through the dialogue, the story plot, observations about libraries, books, historic characters in books and why books are essential to our society.

The illustrations in the "book-club" edition, published as a book-dividend in 1955 by Lippincott stimulated the design and building of the model of "Parnassus" as illustrated here. This model is larger and takes more space than the other models that represent my interest in books, but I cannot look at the model without remembering many of the observations of Roger Mifflin as they appear throughout the two books.

Further it will help to clarify why many of us have such a deep and sincere interest in books.

Rather than try to explain any more of the ideals and philosophy in the books suppose we take a look at a few of the excerpts that illustrate the content of the books.

"... His eyes were twinkling now and I could see him warming up.

"Lord" he said, "when you sell a man a book you don't sell him just twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue—you sell him a whole new life. Love and friendship and humor and ships at sea at night—there's all heaven and earth in a book, a real book I mean. Jimny! If I were a baker or a butcher or a broom huckster, people would run to the gate when I came by—just waiting for my stuff. And here I go loaded with ever-lasting salvation—yes, mam, salvation for their little, stunted minds—and it is hard to make them see it. That's what makes it worthwhile. . . . That's what this country needs—more books."

Parnassus on Wheels, page 44

"... 'That's the best of it,' he went on, 'I have such a good time. Peg and Bock (that's the dog) and I go loafing along the road on a warm summer



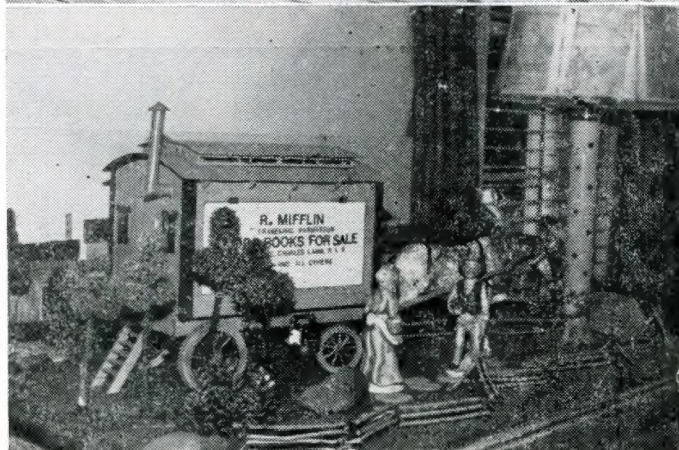
day, and by and by we'll fetch alongside some boarding house and there are the boarders all rocking off their lunch on the veranda, most of them bored to death—nothing good to read, nothing to do but watch the flies buzzing in the sun, and the chickens running up and down in the dust. . .

First thing you know I'll sell half a dozen books that put life into them, and they don't forget Parnassus in a hurry. POW pp. 45

. . . You see, my idea is that the common people—in the country, that is—never have had a chance to get hold of books, that never have had any one to explain what books can mean. . . . It's all right for college presidents to draw up their five foot shelves of great literature, and for the publishers to advertise their sets of Linoleum Classics, but what the people need is the good, homely, honest stuff—something that'll stick to their ribs. POW 46

"You are open in the evening?"

"Yes, until ten o'clock. A great many of my best customers are those who



1 and 2. Parnassus On Wheels. Construction based on the illustrations in the book of the same name by Christopher Morley, illustrations in the books by Douglas Gorsline.



work all day and can only visit bookshops at night. The real book-lovers, you know, are generally among the humbler classes. A man who is impassioned with books has little time or patience to grow rich by concocting schemes for cozening his fellows." The Haunted Bookshop, page 18

"I would have thought," said Gilbert, "that life in a bookshop would be delightfully tranquil."

"Far from it. Living in a bookshop is like living in a warehouse of explosives. These shelves are ranked with the most furious combustibles in the world—the brains of men. I can spend a rainy afternoon reading, and my mind works itself up to such a passion and anxiety over mortal problems that almost unmans me. It is terribly nerve-racking. Surround a man with Carlyle, Emerson, Thoreau, Chesterton, Shaw, Nietzsche, and George Ade, would you wonder at his getting excited. HB pp 25

"... For paradise in the world to come is uncertain, but there is indeed a heaven on this earth, a heaven we inhabit when we read a good book. Pour yourself another glass of wine, and permit me . . . HB pp 26

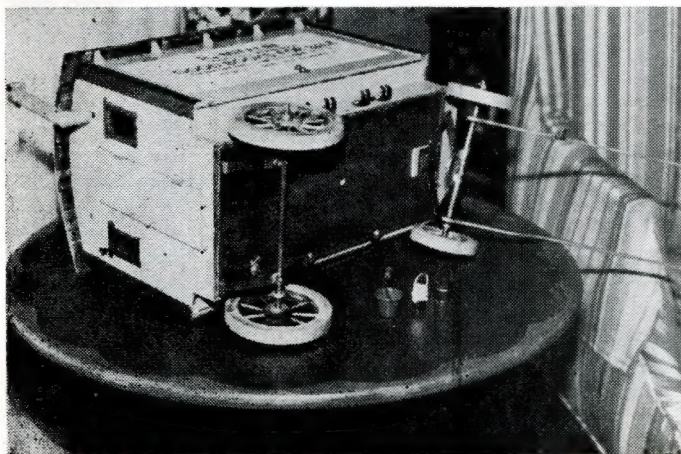
"If you are really interested in bookselling you should come here some evening to a meeting of the Corn Cob Club. Once a month a number of booksellers gather here and we discuss matters of bookish concern over corn-cobs and cider.

: : : "The life of a bookseller is very demoralizing to the intellect," he went on after a pause. "He is surrounded by innumerable books he cannot possibly read them all; he dips into one and picks up a scrap from another. His mind gradually fills itself with miscellaneous flotsam, with superficial opinions, with a thousand half-knowledges. . . HB pp 30

"One thing, however, you must grant the good bookseller. He is tolerant. He is patient to all ideas and theories. Surrounded, engulfed by the torrent of men's words, he is willing to listen to them all. HB pp 30

"I have had a stunning time," she said, patting Bock who stood at her knee, imbibing the familiar and mysterious fragrance by which dogs identify their human friends.

"I haven't even heard of a book for three weeks. I did stop in at the Old Angle book shop yesterday, just to say hullo to Joe Billings. He said all



2. Underside, showing leaf springs.



booksellers are crazy, but that you are the craziest of the lot. He wants to know if you are bankrupt yet."

Roger's slate blue yes twinkled. He hung up a cup in the china closet and lit his pipe before replying.

"What did you say?"

"I said that our shop was haunted, and mustn't be supposed to come under the usual conditions of the trade."

"Bully for you! And what did Joe say to that?"

"Haunted by nuts!"

HB pp 39

Books provide many hours of pleasure for many of us, and these two small books of Christopher Morley will help to a great extent, to explain our interest, and why there will always be book collectors.

I received much satisfaction in the construction of the model of Parnassus On Wheels, and as I got along with the work, wanted to do a better job of trying to reproduce what it represented. For example, the body is supported by real leaf springs made from spring bronze, the steering and front suspension is the "fifth" wheel concept that was used in the old wagons. The wheels have individual spokes and have bronze bearings. The two roofs are of veneer construction over a fabricated roof structure. The horse collar is leather with pliable inner core and a bronze outer ring.

I have always believed in "sharing" and this book "thing" is one of the many interests that we have that is made more enjoyable by sharing it with others. Books are illustrated to increase our understanding and excite our interest. The construction of models is just another step we may take in demonstrating just how we see what is on the printed page.

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### A DIME NOVEL COLLECTOR'S BOOK SHELF

**STRATEMEYER PSEUDONYMS AND SERIES BOOKS.** An Annotated Checklist of Stratemeyer and Stratemeyer Syndicate Publications. Compiled and Edited by Deidre Johnson. Greenwood Press, P. O. Box 5007, Westport, Conn. 06881. \$45.00. Miss Johnson has gathered all the information on Stratemeyer's writings and that of the syndicate into an organized bibliography. In a first reading of the book, I have been unable to find any errors of material importance which is a lot to say for a book containing so much information. Congratulations to Miss Johnson. Although the price of \$45 may appear to be high, it is well worth it. Stratemeyer and the syndicate wrote some 1500 books which sold for two hundred million copies.

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## RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES CONCERNING DIME NOVELS, BOYS BOOKS, ETC.

**HORATIO ALGER, JR. COMMEMORATIVE STAMP.** Article in the Hoosier Voice of Fellowship giving a report on the ceremony at Willow Grove, Pa. concerning the issuance of the Horatio Alger commemorative stamp. The Hoosier Voice of Fellowship is published by Amos Smith, 11636 East 46th St., Indianapolis, Ind. 46236.

**TOM SWIFT AND THE HARD COVER HEROES**, by Charles J. Jordan. Collectibles Illustrated, May/June 1982. A review of boy and girl series books. Good for an overall view, but contains many errors. (Article sent in by Jack Dizer).

**LIBRARY FOCUS ON DIME NOVELS.** Short news item in BIBLIO TALK published by the Friends of the University of Rochester Libraries, Rochester, N. Y. The University of Rochester has recently acquired a large collection of dime novels and has many of them on display. (Sent in by Paul Latimer). The display is also written up and illustrated in the News section of the Library Journal of April 15, 1982. (Sent in by Jack Bales).

**THE ORIGINAL AMERICAN DREAMER**, by Jill Lawrence of the Associated Press. A review of the Horatio Alger convention stressing the personalities attending and the high prices paid at the auction for Alger first editions. Very good but apt to give a false view of values to the uninformed book dealer. The article appeared in numerous papers across the country. I've received the article from many members including Stanley Pachon and Jack Bales.

**YELLOWBACK LIBRARY #9** contains Down Melody Lane With Lilian Garis, by John E. Abreu; Notes On Owen Johnson's Lawrenceville Series, by Bob Chenu; Basic Nancy Drew Part IV, by David Farah; The Adventures of the Mystery Boys, by Jack Brahee; #10, The Rocket Riders, by Robert L. George; He Knew What Boys Wanted to Read, by Willis J. Potthoff; Fearless Dave Fearless, by Jack Brahee and Basic Nancy Drew Part V. The Yellowback Library is published by Gil O'Gara, 2019 S. E. 8th St., Des Moines, Iowa.

**THE MYSTERY & ADVENTURE SERIES #9** Summer 1982 contains many excellent articles including: Assignment in Space with Rip Foster, by Kent Winslow; Blasting Off with Tor Corbett, by I. R. Ybarra; well illustrated. The review is published by Fred Woodworth, P. O. Box 3488, Tucson, Ariz. 85722.

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